Background Statement—Lauren Breton

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As far back as I can remember, my school system has always placed great emphasis on tracking students. While I would say that it was a welcoming environment, I would also say that we each had a certain group that we belonged to academically, and that while we all interacted socially in elementary school, our academic group began to essentially control our social group also. From an early age, I was tracked into the gifted and talented program, and I stayed on this track throughout middle and high school. Ever since I got put on the gifted and talented track, my teachers and my classmates expected me to take honors or advanced placement courses whenever possible. I remember my math teacher being in disbelief that I chose not to continue on with advanced placement calculus, even when I had spent my entire junior year struggling with honors pre-calc.

In the same way that my school expected me to take advanced courses and attend a four-year college upon completion of high school, so did my parents. My father spent his life working in manual labor jobs and coming home exhausted and in pain. He abused his body so thoroughly that he now has near-crippling arthritis and receives disability. When I was growing up, he always told me that he wanted more for me than a life of manual labor or a life of working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. My mother wanted the same things for me, but she wanted them because she believes in the power of education to change lives and she always pushed me into taking the hardest classes available, following through with my enrichment courses in elementary school, and preparing for college.

Not only was I personally receiving the message that I needed to go to college from my parents and my teachers, but I was also seeing an emphasis on education placed in the media. I remember watching television shows with characters going to college, as well as seeing advertisements for colleges while I was watching television or when I was looking at magazines. Throughout my childhood, it distinctly remember seeing the effects of the business world on education throughout these advertisements of college programs, as well as through the now prevalent Baby Einstein programs, Rosetta Stone language learning programs, and online degree programs.

All of these factors conspired together in such a way that I didn’t even consider not going to a four-year college upon completion of high school. I never considered going into the military nor did I ever think about going straight into the world of work. I changed my mind often about what I wanted to be when I grew up: the president, a geologist, a journalist, an English teacher; but I never changed my mind about whether or not I would go to college. I knew that I loved having discussions with my classmates and that I liked being able to talk about what we were learning, which was a very big part of my elementary, middle, and high school education. In the majority of my classes throughout my K-12 education, we sat in either small groups or pairs, or sat in circles or horseshoes so that we were always able to share with our neighbor or talk about what we were doing as a whole class.

In addition to this very holistic, whole-group learning approach, my teachers also had us do a lot of discussing of what we were learning, working in small groups, participating in whole-class debates, drawing images of what we were reading, and taking notes on the lectures that they were giving us. Particularly in my math classes, my teachers chose to lecture as their means of teaching and would then have us work on problems in small groups. This was never particularly effective for me, not because I didn’t know what I was doing, but because we had students who weren’t entirely sure of the material working with other students who were also unsure, which just led to an overwhelming sense of confusion. This often resulted in missed steps during the math homework, leading to completely wrong answers.

Where my math teachers tended to lecture, however, my English teachers tended to listen and encourage us to do group work and communicate with each other. This worked really well for me as a senior in high school, specifically when we were learning about the romantic poets. I remember that I worked on a project where we created life-size tracings of ourselves, and my partner and I created Percy and Mary Shelley. We decorated the life-size images according to what we learned about their backgrounds, read some of their works and did an analytic interpretation of it, and then explained our drawn portraits to the class. I remember that not only did I learn quite a bit about Percy and Mary Shelley, but I had tons of fun being able to be creative in how I portrayed the portraits to the class. My English teacher at the time, Ms. Weatherbee, was also teaching drama classes and encouraged us to really embellish and make the project our own, which gave me a sense of autonomy over the finished project. She was a spectacular teacher and she often helped facilitate our learning by having us dress up in costume, draw pictures, act out what we were reading, and decorate the classroom with memorable quotes from our books.

Throughout my K-12 education, I stayed in the same school district. In the Livermore/Livermore Falls district, we didn’t have a lot of ethnic or racial diversity, other than a couple of girls who were mulatto and a boy who moved to Maine from Jamaica. Now that I reflect back on it, it didn’t seem as though we had a whole lot of economic diversity, either. The majority of students in my high school received free or reduced lunch, although it wasn’t something that I ever thought about. Most of my close friends did not receive free or reduced lunch, but it never seemed strange to me that almost everyone else did. Since Livermore Falls is a mill-town, when our paper mill really cut back on employees it hit the community exceptionally hard and from then on, many parents weren’t making enough to live above the poverty line. Some students still had parents working at the mill, or working for the state of Maine, like my mother does. But growing up, I never felt that differently from them or that we lived in a higher economic bracket, although now I realize that we were solidly in the middle class and they were definitely in the lower class.

Although I didn’t feel any economically different from my peers, I did feel as though I received a completely different education than many of my peers. Where I was tracked into the more advanced courses, my peers often spent quite a lot of time listening to lectures and working on their homework in class, because the teachers felt as though they needed extra support. In my high school, seniors could take two work-study periods, two study-hall periods (which they didn’t need to show up for), and could go to three classes in a tech program, and all they would need to take was their senior English class. Many of my fellow students chose this option, but the only senior English class offered during the period that they chose to take English for, L4, was a non-college preparatory English course. If they wanted to have the schedule that they had been planning for for years, they had to take a lower-level English course. I remember being completely upset and disgusted by this, because many of these students seemed fully capable of handling the “regular” senior English course, but weren’t even given the option to challenge themselves.

Since I’ve graduated from Livermore Falls High School, our school district (before it consolidated) received incredibly low ratings from the Department of Education. Personally, I feel as though I received a solid education in many ways from my school district. Maybe that was because I took advanced courses which tended to have fewer students in them, or maybe it was because I chose to take extra courses rather than taking more study halls, but I think that I received an education that was really successful in social studies, the arts, and English. My education was definitely lacking in the math and science departments, but although I think that my teachers were a large factor in that, I also think that it is important to note that I was much less excited about and engaged in those classes, so I’m sure that it is partially my fault as well.

My background will affect the way that I teach because I have seen first-hand the negative affects of tracking, and I am very committed to not trying to enforce tracking upon my students in any way. I am also very committed to giving all of my students the kind of treatment that I was accustomed to as a member of the advanced placement group of students, and I want to hear what all of my students think and have to say. I also want to give them a variety of ways to participate and interact with the material, from acting it out to drawing a life-size portrait of Percy Shelley. These are the traits that I think contribute to a superior teacher, and I hope that I can implement what I have learned in my education classes as well as what I have experienced as a student to make myself a caring, compassionate teacher.

I have chosen teaching as a profession because I want to make a difference. I want to be an adult that my students cannot only learn from, but can trust and can connect with. As a teacher, I want to gain the ability to be a positive role-model in the lives of my students. I want to gain trust. I want to gain the ability to share my passion with a whole new generation of students. I want to gain more than a living, I want to gain a life.

To the profession of teaching, I hope to be able to contribute my enthusiasm and love for the subject of English. I hope to be able to contribute a part of myself to my students, and I hope that I can be open and honest with them and can be a teacher that they can trust, as well as an adult that they can relate to. I hope that I can contribute my energy, my excitement, and my passion for English in a way that is accessible to all of my students and that I can become one of the teachers that they reflect upon and appreciate after they have left my classroom.

Although I am incredibly excited to start teaching, I am also incredibly nervous. I am afraid that I won’t be a good enough teacher, that my students won’t be able to connect to me, that I’ll get burned out after the first couple of years. I am afraid that my passion will dwindle, that my enthusiasm will falter. Most of all, however, I am afraid that my students will leave my classroom and they will feel as though I have failed them. The only fear that I have about my future as an educator that is more scary than that is the fear of my students leaving my classroom thinking that they have failed.